

Children's Theatre, John Donahue shared common destiny for nearly two decades

By Peter Vukobrat
Staff Writer

The immensely successful Children's Theatre Company and its artistic director John Donahue have been inseparably intertwined since its inception in 1961.

In 1975 he pulled the theater from under the protective wing of the long-gestating Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts. His ability to attract wealthy patrons and talented people enabled him to turn an obscure troupe into an internationally acclaimed organization.

Now, with Donahue in trouble, the financial stability of the theater is in doubt.

Several foundations and agencies that provided equipment loans for the theater say they will reassess their support, leaving their concerns in the spotlight of threatened units against the theater's patrons of students who may have been severely abused.

They say they will look at the theater's management and financial strength as well as the artistic merits of funding proposals. Fully a third of the theater's \$1.5 million budget comes from such groups.

The theater has tacitly acknowledged that it might get a rocky landing before people that have supported it in the past. The theater's board has asked for Minnesota Arts and Humanities to deny supplementary action on grants the theater had sought totaling \$25,000.

The theater that now attracts hundreds of thousands of patrons from the Twin Cities to the Midwest and beyond has been the subject of a scandal that erupted in the back rooms of a Minneapolis restaurant.

The story of the Children's Theatre Company began in 1961, when a young woman named Beth Lisson and her husband, John Donahue, founded a theater for children called the Muppet Players that presented plays in a back room of Manna House restaurant and was a novel addition to what was then a limited local theater scene.

In 1963 the theater moved to an abandoned police station, and a young man named John Clark Donahue, who signed as an painter, set designer, teacher and associate director, within two years he had pulled Lisson to the side and assumed control of the company as artistic director.

In 1965, he and members of the Muppet company began to take back up residence in a small, production establishment in the Minneapolis building of Arts and Humanities Center. But a few years with what remained of the Muppet company before the building it.

With the move to the building, the Children's Theatre Company was officially born and Donahue was acknowledged as artistic director. At nearly working with him, or even to join him, were Wendy Lott, John Donahue, Beth Lisson and Myron Johnson, actors and designers who formed a core of the Children's Theatre Company that is still together.

Donahue established himself as a bold and imaginative artist with total artistic control of the theater, but he was also financially in the picture. The theater became an arm of the institute, subject to its board of directors. The institute board set a strict budget for the theater, and received its budget reviews.

John Davidson, a free-lance writer who was a member of the theater in its early years, recalls that the budget for the first season in the new quarters was \$77,000, with 10 full-time employees of the theater receiving a maximum of \$4,000 a year. The budget was increased to \$97,000 in the second year and has risen since in its current figure of \$1.5 million.

By the early 1970s the theater was



An illustration in Tomie DePaola's book, "The Crown of God," which was adapted for the stage by CTC in 1981.

beginning to gain national and international attention. In 1971, it represented the United States at the world congress of the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People held in Athens, N.Y., and Montreal, Quebec.

In 1973 the theater received a \$250,000 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, followed a year later by an additional \$250,000 from the foundation for the development of a new theater space.

The theater's development took a major step in 1974 when it moved into its present quarters in the south wing of the new complex that contained the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the Children's Theatre Company and the Minneapolis College of Art and Design.

By this time the theater had become a full member of the Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts, which oversees all three organizations.

But in mid 1975 Donahue and the society clashed over the theater's budget. The expense of raising the theater and the other new facilities was far higher than had been anticipated, and the society severely cut the theater's budget. Donahue was asked to accept a \$250,000 slash from the previous year's budget of \$500,000. He was requesting an increase to \$750,000. Rather than accept the cut, he threatened to close the theater. Employees of the theater voted to support his decision.

In a compromise, the theater was given its independence from the society and became a trust, paying annual rent, at that time \$114,000. Its new position led to an immediate increase in the theater's budget, to about \$1 million. For the first time the nonprofit corporation also came under the direction of its own board of directors, of which Donahue continued to be a member.

As the theater's budget increased, so did its need to raise funds from outside sources. In the 1980-81 fiscal year it raised \$1.2 million from earned income, including \$1.1 million from ticket sales. The rest came from tuition at the school, payments for outreach programs and occasional sales of the theater.

To balance its \$1.5 million budget, it raised \$531,347 from outside sources, including \$331,189 from government grants and \$200,158 from corporations, foundations and individuals. This fiscal year the theater paid off a \$451,587 debt to its parent fund and is operating in the black.

If private and public supporters of the theater are not satisfied that

their money will support a successful institution, that critical source of donations could dry up, theater supporters fear.

The Minnesota State Arts Board was to consider funding for the theater at its May 14 meeting, but last Thursday the theater asked it to delay action.

When the theater resubmits the request, said executive director Jim Olson, the board will review them primarily on the basis of artistic merit, financial stability and capable management. If the board is worried that the funds might be offered to him, the board will seek advice from the state attorney general, he said.

Other funding agencies may be similarly cautious if they think it likely that the money will get tied up in legal claims by patrons of abused students.

Margaret Wurke, managing director of the Deyan Student Foundation, which has supported the theater regularly, was cautious when asked to comment on the possible effect of the cuts.

"For years we have been positive supporters of the theater," she said, "and until we knew very much more about the current situation, we will view this as a matter that affects individuals rather than the institution." The foundation has given the theater \$100,000 in general and project support in the past three years. In September 1983 it gave \$250,000 of a \$500,000 pledge for the theater's current capital fund drive. Consideration of the remaining \$250,000 will occur in December, Wurke said.

The theater's artistic success and its popularity with the community have never been in doubt.

The theater's production seasonably average between 80 and 90 percent of capacity attendance in its 400-seat

theater. In 1982-83 it presented 281 performances of its six full productions and drew 286,477 patrons, 85 percent of capacity. It also had nearly 5,000 season ticket subscribers during that year.

In 1980 the theater launched its school, offering theater arts classes for credit to Minneapolis high school students who received their academic training at their home schools. In 1983 the theater replaced that program with one providing students with a full academic program in an open-ended setting. Academic work is combined with courses in theater arts.

The school has been accredited by CTC mentioned on page 18A.

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